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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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SMOKING AND HEART DISEASE

If asked to name the number one health problem caused or aggravated by smoking, most of us would say "cancer" or, more specifically, "lung cancer". Those guesses are wrong. Smoking is one of the three major causes of heart disease. Heart disease and related circulatory diseases are the number one causes of death in the United States today.

Last week, the Surgeon General of the United States, C. Edward Koop, M.D., released the annual report on smoking. The report states unambiguously, "...smoking actually causes more deaths a year from heart disease than from all cancers combined."

Doctors have known for years that people who smoke are more likely to suffer heart attacks and other consequences of heart disease. It is only recently that massive amounts of data have been collected and analyzed to prove that smoking is, in fact, one of the three major causes of heart disease.

Three factors are about equally important in causing heart disease. The three are smoking, uncontrolled high blood pressure, and high levels of serum cholesterol.

The fascinating and frightening fact is that a person with two of these factors, rather than one, is four times more likely to develop heart disease than a person with a single factor. People with all three factors present are eight times more likely to develop heart disease.

The wonderful thing about the three major causes of heart disease is that they are usually easily modified by medical treatment and changes in personal habits. Most high blood pressure sufferers can bring their blood pressure under control by losing weight and taking medication regularly. Most people with high cholesterol can bring their cholesterol level down to an acceptable point simply by altering their diets. Most important, smokers can cut down, and smokers can quit smoking.

Because there are still so many smokers all around us, we often lose sight of the fact that we are slowly winning the war against smoking. In 1965, about 42% of the population smoked. The current figure is now at about 33%. The decrease would have been even greater

.....MORE.....MORE.....MORE.....

were it not for a surge in smoking by women. Smoking by women and smoking by teenagers and young adults are the two great problem areas.

I want to emphasize that the Surgeon General's report provides incontrovertible evidence that smoking actually causes heart disease. It is not merely a factor statistically correlated with it. The report details the physiological mechanisms through which smoking directly affects the heart and the entire circulatory system.

There are about 55-million Americans who smoke on an average more than a pack-and-a-half a day. If just a fraction of these people stopped smoking, tens-of-thousands of lives would be saved. Experts estimate almost 300,000 Americans escaped death from heart disease last year because they quit smoking or never smoked.

Last year all America watched the courageous Seattle dentist, Barney Clark, undergo extensive surgery for the implantation of the Jarvick-7 artificial heart. The operation extended Dr. Clark's life by a very brief time. It is difficult to estimate the costs as many were absorbed by the University of Utah's heart research program. A conservative cost estimate would run over half a million dollars. Cardiologists are skeptical as to whether heart transplants and artificial hearts will ever be a practical answer for more than a tiny fraction of people whose lives are threatened by heart disease. Barney Clark was a heavy smoker for more than 20 years.

A concluding note: No matter how long or how heavily a person has smoked, it pays to quit. Statistics on people who have given up smoking are much closer to the figures on people who have never smoked than they are to the figures on people who persist in ignoring the major medical findings of our time.

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